

Preventing Future Wars: Reconciling Disparities in Textbook Descriptions in Opposing Nations

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Accepted for Publication: 2023

Published Date: October 2023

Abstract

As biased views of the nation are ingrained in history textbooks, prejudice among citizens grows, establishing a discrepancy in how different countries see their shared history. These biased textbooks may influence students with patriotic rhetoric and perhaps contribute to future wars. This issue can be resolved by evaluating textbooks for reliability and cooperating with textbooks from other nations. The solutions found in history textbooks help to keep the peace as a student involved in international education and conferences.

Keywords: International Relations, Education, History textbooks, War, Peace

1. Introduction

“China urges Japan to drop all flight curbs after country eases airport bans” (Asia News Network, 2023); “Russo-Ukraine war: Belarus summons Ukrainian ambassador over missile incident – as it happened” (The Guardian, 2023)– from the television that’s on at home to the news application notifications on one’s phone, we engage with international news constantly. The moment we glance at those letters that signify our own country, most of us feel patriotism; the moment we glance at some other letters, some may feel a slight abomination of certain countries even before fully hearing the news report or reading the whole article. These intrinsic emotions and biases are fundamentally built upon each country’s education of history. Since most countries’ textbooks are published by that country’s publisher, the self-affirmation of the victim mentality and the lack of self-interrogation and mutual understanding of history being reflected upon those textbooks are essentially passing on the biases and leading to repeating its history. Recognizing that the current history textbooks have major biases toward their history is crucial to understand why those issues are still shaping politics today. Personally, as an organizer of the Sino-Japan Youth Conference and a student at a high school in the US studying AP US History and AP European History, who also previously learned Japanese history at Japanese elementary and middle schools, I have noticed that the biases built into each country’s history textbook, the fundamental education, is establishing further separation and misunderstandings of

those countries. Biased perspectives of the country are built into schools’ history textbooks, causing further biases amongst the citizens, creating a gap between different countries’ understandings of the shared history, and limiting globalization; this disparity can lead to brainwashing students as propaganda and leading to future conflicts. This may be approached by certifying textbooks with their credibility levels and reconciling through engaging with each opposing country’s textbooks.

2. Discussion of the current situation

2.1 Current History Textbooks and their Narrow Perspectives: the Nanjing Massacre or Incident

Undoubtedly, the existence of the subject history itself is a valid approach to understanding history by confirming that indeed those events happened, despite the major biases. Current history textbooks globally allow students to understand their history from their own country’s perspective: the narrow perspective with a tendency toward victim mentality and hero mentality. For instance, a country may emphasize an incident where it was attacked, while briefly touching on an incident where it was the attacker. Even the smallest wordings may change the tone of the textbook, such as the Nanjing “事件, incident” (社会科中学生の歴史, 2016, pg. 220) as opposed to the Nanjing “大屠杀, massacre” (初中历史八年级, 2023, pg. 94). An incident hints at an event that was inevitable; a massacre signifies an intentional mass murder of innocent lives. In the Japanese

textbook, Nanjing's "Incident" takes up barely a column, simply introducing it as an extra event during the Sino-Japanese War in a few lines. The "Incident" is described as simply a "侵攻, invasion" and "占領, capture" (社会科中学生の歴史, 2016, pg. 220). In the Chinese textbook, on the other hand, the "Massacre" takes up over a page, describing how the incident was "惨绝人寰的, tragic" caused by "其凶残的法西斯暴行, the brutal fascist atrocities" (初中历史八年级, 2023, pg. 94). Given those descriptions at significantly different degrees, it is crucial for the aggressor to recognize the tragedy they have brought. In this case, Japanese students are simply learning that the Nanjing "Incident" was another event in the Sino-Japanese War-- never will they recognize that their ancestors "除了屠杀, 所到之处, 强奸妇女, 焚毁房屋, 抢劫掳掠, 无恶不作, not only mass-murders, wherever they went, they raped women, burned down houses, robbed and looted, and committed all kinds of crimes" (初中历史八年级, 2023, pg. 94). As history textbooks are the majority of the sources students learn about their nations' past, those disparities in the descriptions get rooted into their knowledge as a form of minor brainwashing through those textbooks reflecting victim mentality and hero mentality.

2.2 Current History Textbooks and their Narrow Perspectives: the Pacific War

Another example of history textbooks limiting students to learning history from an inadequate perspective is the Pacific War between Japan and the US. Both countries' history textbooks start introducing the Pacific War from the Pearl Harbor Attack but to an inconsistent length. The US History textbook elaborately explains the event in over two pages, describing it as "a tragic event we may never forget--remember Pearl Harbor" (American Pageant, 2018, pg. 797). Yet, the Japanese textbook (社会科中学生の歴史, 2016, pg. 226) only has a minuscule section dedicated to the event with barely any detail but the date and location-- not even the number of casualties. The same historical event is introduced in those two textbooks as if they are different events. A contrasting example is the Atomic Bombs that followed the Pearl Harbor Attack later in the Pacific War. The Japanese textbook (社会科中学生の歴史, 2016, pg. 232) spends an elaborate page dedicated to the events with detailed before and after maps of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a chart of the number of casualties, size, and temperature of the bomb. In comparison, the US history textbook (American Pageant, 2018, pg. 812) introduced the events with a simple picture of the aftermath of the bomb with a few lines explaining the context, mirroring the low level of emphasis the Japanese textbook has on the Pearl Harbor Attack. Indeed, glorifying a country's own victory in a war or a success of an attack is commonly seen in those textbooks; however, this signifies that there is a compelling lack of self-denial and admission of

the country's action. Recognizing those "mistakes" in which the country was the aggressor is just as crucial as sympathizing with those events in which they were the victims, in order not to repeat our history and maintain peace, such as addressing the human impact of nuclear war.

2.3 History Textbooks as Patriotic Propaganda

Through those bias-viewed textbooks acting as propaganda, students are ingrained into glorifying their own nation, which potentially contributes to future conflicts due to the inculcated prejudice. According to the monograph, *The Basic Principles of War Propaganda* by Belgian historian Anne Morelli, "Whoever casts doubt on [the country's] propaganda helps the enemy and is a traitor" (Morelli, 2001, ch.10). Morelli claims that this method was used during the Iraq war, despite the fact that the international public was significantly more divided than during the Kosovo battle. Being anti-war meant supporting Saddam Hussein. Similarly, students are forced to believe in what is written in the history textbooks, or else, they are opposing their own country: traitors to their own nation, limiting their critical thoughts and engagements with objectivism. In addition, as Morelli discusses how that war propaganda is supposedly "sacred" therefore the war itself is a sacred action (Morelli, 2001, ch. 9), Russia's liberation of its compatriots in Ukraine in the current Russo-Ukrainian war is also an extensive mission and a "sacred" one. The history of German national supremacy and the extermination of the Jews in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* of World War II was also made possible due to its "sacredness" that citizens are brainwashed to believe in. Meanwhile, young people in those nations who are dissatisfied with the current situation are easily brainwashed into the ideas of "helping the enemy is being a traitor" and "wars are sacred". For instance, in February 2013, Putin announced: "единый учебник истории России, a single Russian history textbook" that showed "уважение ко всем этапам прошлого, respect for all stages of the past" as patriotic propaganda, in the context of "переписывая прошлое, чтобы оправдать нынешнее авторитарное правление, rewriting the past to justify current authoritarian rule" (永綱, 2016, pg. 90). As a result of this policy, Russian textbooks have referred to Stalin as "самый успешный советский лидер, the most successful Soviet leader" and rewrote textbooks to glorify his achievements. In addition, during Putin's rule, under the title of "суверенная демократия, sovereign democracy," the Russian history textbook states, "нет демократии без национального суверенитета, there is no democracy without national sovereignty" (Филиппов, 2007, pg. 34). Similarly, in post-World War II Japan, based on the matters concerning the handling of textbooks accompanying the end of the war, those textbooks deemed inappropriate by the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers were rewritten or painted

with black ink to hide those inappropriate parts. In some subjects, almost all lines were crossed out and censored. In elementary and junior high schools of the time, the Occupation Army issued an order to “戦意高揚をうたった文章の箇所については墨汁で塗りつぶして読めないように, make it impossible to read by blacking out parts of the textbooks used at the time that was about raising the fighting spirit” (山村, 2014, pg. 35). For example, one Japanese history textbook used pre-war included how Japan “西太平洋にも進出する勇敢な我々は、世界史上大規模な海洋を支配しているがなお前途に難関あり, courageously dominates the largest oceans in world history, yet difficulties lie ahead” (黒塗り教科書, 2019, pg. 4) and the tactics of how to expand further into the Western Pacific, which was crossed out post-war. Hence, those textbooks were indeed used as patriotic propaganda to encourage students to glorify and participate in the subsequent war. If textbooks are written with patriotism like the Russian history textbook and the Japanese textbooks before the crossing-out, students may be encouraged to participate in future wars, just like youth soldiers in ISIS are taught to believe that they can go to heaven, only if they join الجهاد, jihad, the holy war (Aljazeera, 2016). Indeed, education is the tool to establish the next generation; authorities have the power to manipulate and brainwash those curious students into extreme patriotism, potentially turning into a factor in future wars.

3. Potential Solutions

3.1 UNICEF Textbook Credibility and historyisasharedstory.com

In order to prevent those misunderstandings and conflicts, the issue of biases in textbooks may be tackled by certifying textbooks based on their trustworthiness levels and reconciling by engaging with textbooks from their counterparts. One potential solution is to establish the United Nations Children’s Fund Certification of Textbook Credibility. UNICEF may certify every textbook’s credibility and its bias level, so educational institutions and students can choose to learn those “histories” with the right intentions. Students who wish to learn history from an unbiased and neutral perspective can opt to learn from those textbooks with high-level credibility certified. Students who already use a textbook may also check the credibility and bias level of the textbook to see if what they are learning is pure fact or a fact mixed with prejudice. For instance, Chinese students learning about the Nanjing Massacre with the textbook introduced earlier may learn from the certification that the descriptions are written with high parochialism in comparison to other textbooks even within the country. This way, students and educational institutions can choose to learn from those textbooks deliberately. Another prospective solution is to establish historyisasharedstory.com, a website

that students can access to see how other countries are explaining the same events. The linked website is the one I have roughly designed. The United Nations may also require schools to dedicate a certain amount of history classes to engage with the textbooks of the opposing countries of the past war in order to acknowledge the perspectives from the other sides. With the use of this website, students can distinguish how opposing countries place different weights on certain events. For example, Japanese students might realize the low attention paid to the Pearl Harbor Attack in Japanese history textbooks without studying abroad in the US, which is how I found out that the event is not focused on teaching at all in Japan, despite the fact that Japan was indeed the aggressor of the event. The opposite may happen for American students when learning about atomic bombs. With the use of the United Nations Children’s Fund Certification of Textbook Credibility and historyisasharedstory.com, students across the world may decrease the gap between different countries’ understandings of shared history and prevent future conflicts.

4. Conclusion

Consequently, as biased perceptions of the country are embedded into history textbooks, further prejudice rises amongst citizens which establishes a disparity between nations’ understandings of common history. Those biased textbooks have the potential of brainwashing pupils as patriotic propaganda and perhaps being a cause of future wars. This can be tackled by certifying textbooks based on their credibility levels and reconciling by engaging with the textbooks of other countries. As a student engaged in international education and conferences, I sincerely hope that those panaceas through history textbooks contribute to maintaining peace.

Acknowledgments

This research could not have been completed without the involvement and support of numerous individuals and organizations. I am truly grateful to everyone who contributed to the project’s success.

Specifically, I would like to thank Mr. Kwok for giving me this opportunity to present my research paper, as well as Mr. Antonucci and Ms. Chady for reviewing and giving me feedback on the paper. Furthermore, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my peers who provided me with foreign history textbooks across the globe – Lena and Julianne. This paper would not have been possible without any of their support.

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